



White Sturgeon

Kootenai River Population

Acipenser transmontanus

STATUS

Endangered (59 FR 46002, September 6, 1994)

DESCRIPTION

The Kootenai River white sturgeon is light grey in color, and can grow quite large. These sturgeon have a characteristic elongated body, with a large, broad head, small eyes and flattened snout. This fish has a ventral mouth with four barbels in a transverse row on the ventral surface of the snout. In the Kootenai River Basin, adult sturgeon move upstream into the Kootenai River to spawn during the spring to early summer, in swift current. Water temperatures are usually between 48° and 55° Fahrenheit (8.9° and 13° Celsius). Males first begin spawning between 11 and 22 years of age, and females usually several years later. Female sturgeon may spawn several times during their lifetime at two- to 11-year intervals.

HISTORY

Considered genetically distinct from other Columbia River white sturgeon, the Kootenai River population by Donnington Falls in British Columbia has been isolated for over 10,000 years. Sturgeon are anadromous in most of the large rivers in which they occur, but are landlocked in the middle and upper Columbia river system.

DISTRIBUTION

For the species as a whole, white sturgeon are found only in the Pacific shores of North America from the Aleutian Islands of Alaska to Monterey, California. White sturgeon in the Kootenai River Basin (Kootenai River and Kootenay Lake) are found in Idaho, Montana and British Columbia, Canada. In 1997 the white sturgeon population was estimated at 1,468 adults and only 100 wild juveniles. Most adult fish are older than 25 years in age.

WHAT HAS THREATENED THIS SPECIES?

The free-flowing river habitat for the Kootenai River white sturgeon has been modified and impacted by development in the Kootenai River basin. The natural Kootenai River flows were altered by the construction of the Libby Dam for hydropower in 1974, which also negatively affects successful reproduction and removes some nutrients necessary for biological productivity.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO HELP RECOVER THIS SPECIES?

The Recovery Plan for the Kootenai River white sturgeon calls for implementing various conservation measures to prevent extinction and allow successful natural reproduction of the species to begin. Actions include increasing Libby Dam water releases during the spring that would enhance Kootenai River flows to encourage natural reproduction. A conservation aquaculture program, operated by the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, has been developed to rear juvenile white sturgeon yearly over the next ten years for release into the Kootenai River. To date, about 3,000 young sturgeon have been released from eggs hatched in 1992, 1994 and 1995.

REFERENCES

USFWS.1999. Recovery Plan for the Kootenai River Population of the White Sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*).

USFWS. Kootenai River White Sturgeon Recovery Update Newsletter.

